

FROM FIELD AND STUDY

Aberrant Plumage in Western Australian Seabirds – Aberrant plumage in seabirds on islands off the Western Australian coast is rarely reported. Over many years of visiting seabird breeding islands I have recorded three instances, (1) an albino Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*; (2) a Brown Booby showing leucistic or schizochroism plumage; and (3) a leucistic Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris*. I provide photographs and details of them.

1. On a long range excursion along the Kimberley coast in August and September 2006 with the Western Australian Naturalist' Club, a visit was made to the Lacepede Islands – a group of four important seabird and turtle breeding islands lying about 30 km off the mainland about 120 km north of Broome. While observing Brown Boobies on Middle Island on 4 September 2006 an adult albino Brown Booby was seen flying from the breeding area (see photo on cover). The plumage of the Brown Booby is normally a uniform dark brown apart from a white lower breast and belly. However the plumage of this bird was entirely white with pale skin around the throat and pink eyes. The bill and feet were a pale greyish colour with a pinkish tinge. Although late in the season and the breeding cycle almost completed, there were still a number of large fluffy chicks and juveniles scattered

over the island. Clustered along the shoreline were many almost fledged juveniles.

2. On 30 July 2004 at Adele Island off the Kimberley coast about 100 km north of Cape Leveque, I photographed an oddly plumaged Brown Booby likely to be leucistic (Johnstone, R. pers. com.). The bird was a fully fledged juvenile capable of flying a short distance. The bill, legs and feet had a pinkish tinge and where the normal plumage of an adult Brown Booby is dark brown, in this instance there was a barely perceptible faint light-fawn wash. In photographs several of the primary wing feathers appear with a light chestnut tinge, but this may have been due to the light. The eye ring was pink and the iris of the eye was blue instead of being yellow or olive.

3. On 3 December 1989 during filming for the documentary "Wilderness Regained" on the Abrolhos Islands about 60 km off the mid west coast of Western Australia, an albino Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris* chick was found on Wooded Island by fellow naturalist Bob Goodale. The bird's entire plumage was white with faint traces of a darker colour on the breast and tips of wings and tail. The flight and tail feathers were not fully developed. In contrast to the black bill and dark legs usually associated with the Lesser Noddy, these were of an orange yellow colour as was the



Western Australian Naturalists on the Lacepede Islands and an Albino Brown Booby – September 2006. Photo Jim Everett.



Aberrant plumage in a juvenile Brown Booby – Adele Island – July 2004. Photo Kevin Coate.



Albino Leucistic Lesser Noddy – Wooded Island – Abrolhos Islands – December 1989. Photo Kevin Coate.



A normal plumaged Brown Booby and chick – Lacepede Islands 1995. Photo Kevin Coate.

skin around the eye. The eyes had a pinkish tinge and the partial eye rings above and below the eye were white. The chick was perched with a normal plumaged adult, presumably a parent, beside a nest in dense mangroves *Avicennia marina* about 2 m from the ground.

Ron Johnstone curator of ornithology at the Western Australian Museum, describes the plumage of the Lesser Noddy as being leucistic as there is some

very diluted normal colour showing. He is also inclined toward calling the plumage of the Brown Booby on Adele Island leucistic as well. However the term schizochroistic which covers a variety of plumage abnormalities arising from the loss of one or more pigments could also apply. The term leucistic is the most commonly used.

All three birds appeared to be healthy and in good condition.

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